

# 2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Submission. 0002.0028.0031

## **What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?**

"I think mental illness will always be something that is difficult to understand & empathise with unless you have a direct experience with it. I think this is because our current approach to health care is to treat the physical symptom, which for mental illness may not be visible or the illness may be something that has a spectrum of affects. I have been exposed to mental illness since I was a young child, as my mother has suffered since she was in her late teenage years. I have noticed more recently that there is much more awareness and much more understanding of mental illness and mental health than there was when I was younger. To improve the communities understanding education is a must, but also I think we need to change the way this taught and potentially introduce it like you would when discussing any other physical health - i.e. practicing mindfulness and explaining symptoms of anxiety etc. so children are more aware of what they are experiencing just like you would for stomach aches/headaches etc. "

## **What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?**

"Education to identify early symptoms so people can identify and address mental illness early. Potentially include mental health check ups as apart of the standard GP check up, or promote a mental health check up as you would a yearly dental/optical/health check up. Make mental health professionals more accessible"

## **What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?**

N/A

## **What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.**

N/A

## **What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?**

"There are less services, so there are either long wait lists or people need to travel to see professionals. In my mother's case, her psychiatrist was based in Melbourne and she had to travel an hour and a half from Phillip Island to reach him. She required out-patient care but because she did not live in the 'X'km radius they could not provide it. So there was no follow up, and when she was struggling the most, she was not able to travel to Melbourne or was unable to contact her doctors so her treatment was not managed. It was also extremely difficult for my sister and I as mum's carers to find information on available services in the area. Information on

this needs to be more accessible, and more transparent. "

**What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?**

"My experience of being mum's primary mental health carer has taken a dramatic toll on my own wellbeing. We lived in a rural area so access to services for mum was extremely limited. We were fortunate that we could afford top quality care, and she did have a psychiatrist who she saw in Melbourne and a psychologist who she saw locally (once a month) but we struggled a lot with caring for mum. For most of our time caring for mum we felt extremely isolated and misunderstood. The mental health professionals who cared for mum were difficult to get in contact with and often would not discuss or address the concerns we had about mum. It felt like we were fighting against the system. Mum had issues with prescription medication addictions and we would try so hard to get her off the medications she had problems with but then the professions would just prescribe them to her or give her scripts with multiple repeats. They would not discuss management plans with us, and it felt like that once mum was out of their care whether that be from just an appointment or from an in-patient stay, that she was forgotten about. But not only forgotten about but provided with the tools that can lead to her relapsing. And we were just left to deal with the outcome. I have managed mum's care since I was a teenager, and not once was I introduced to or exposed to any support systems for carers. As a child it is extremely confusing, emotionally challenging and isolating to be a carer for a parent, especially when the parent suffers from mental illnesses. There was no resources for carers offered to me. I'm not sure if this is accessible in metro areas, but it is definitely not in rural areas. As we struggled so much with seeking continued care for mum, there was no way we even considered there was support for carers. Now in my mid 20s, I suffer anxiety from many years of worrying about mum's health. She was my first priority and I had no other option other than help her - helping myself was not possible. Years of suppressing my emotions about my mother's health has led to now suffering from my own mental illness. Mental illness is a huge problem, and the work that has been done in education has been so important for the acknowledgement of these illnesses and establishing more awareness, but more needs to be done for the carers who often have to take on so much. If I hadn't lived this life as a carer I would have had no idea about the impact caring for someone can have on you - and this is something I do not think people acknowledge. In the absence of continued follow up and very accessible services, carers need to be included in discussions about care management for the affected individual as often I felt that we were left in the dark. We are not trained in mental health so for us we had no idea how to manage mum when her illness progressed or intensified. I think support groups for carers would be so beneficial, not only because we felt so isolated but to also share coping mechanisms and strategies. "

**What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?**

N/A

**What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?**

N/A

**Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what**

**areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?**

Removal of the 10 subsidised sessions/year. There is no rationale behind this - why 10? why not 20? or 50? Why not make access to counsellors bulk billed? If we are going to take mental illness as seriously as we do cancer or CVD why not give people the same opportunities to access care that those physical health illnesses receive?

**What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victorias mental health system and support improvements to last?**

N/A

**Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?**

N/A